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BUSINESS & LABOR
EXHIBIT NO. 8
DATE 2-20-09
BILL NO. SB 372

February 19, 2009

Letter of Support for Senate Bill 372

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. My name is William Rash and I am the fire chief of the Lockwood Rural Fire District, Billings, Montana. I have asked Chief Waters to present this letter, on my behalf, and in support of SB 372.

I currently have 14 career firefighters on staff. One captain (currently employed) with many years of career service with the district was deemed ineligible due to his age at the time of hire. A second firefighter/paramedic continued with the PERS program as he too was deemed ineligible for FURS participation for the same reason. This firefighter/paramedic is no longer employed by the district.

I also testified during the last legislative session in support of SB 532 whereas we, as rural fire districts, were seeking inclusion into the Firefighter's Unified Retirement System (FURS). The passage of that bill allowed my fire district to begin participating in the FURS program. Although representatives from the MPERA were helpful, there was significant confusion and what appeared to be conjecture on the transition of fire districts from PERS to FURS.

The purpose of SB 532 was to make a more equitable retirement system that would include rural fire districts in addition to municipalities and to allow for the recruitment and retention of high quality staff for rural fire districts.

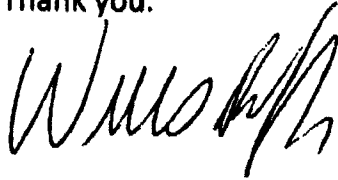
It was my understanding that if this SB 532 passed, that it would allow for existing rural firefighters to potentially be "grandfathered" into the FURS program, thus making the rural fire districts WHOLE in regard to equality with our fellow municipal firefighters. Upon passage and after beginning the transition process to FURS, I was notified by MPERA that my assumption was incorrect and that two of my firefighters were ineligible due to their age (over 34) at the time of their original hire date. Both firefighters had served as career firefighters for this district for many years before the passage of SB 532.

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I feel that it is very important to allow our rural firefighters, regardless of age, the opportunity to participate in the FURS program. Many extraordinary rural firefighters have been denied the opportunity to participate in the FURS program due to their age at the time of hire and without regard for their prior service to rural fire districts.

I would very much appreciate your support of SB 372.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'William Rash', written in a cursive style.

William Rash, Fire Chief
Lockwood Rural Fire District